School Closures and Mergers: A Business Transaction Impacting Human Capital

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Abstract

Traditional business models are being used to address school financial concerns, at the potential expense of the development of children. Specifically, at the expense of already marginalized populations, with limited academic resources. These students and communities may be losing their voices and power through the application of a business practice that has been found to have a 50% failure rate (Terry & O'Brien, 2001), leading to significant capital loss. Notably, human capital of underrepresented students is at stake. This article explores the impact closures and mergers have on the school environments, and recommends strategies to address the challenges of school closures and mergers including implications for school counselors.

Keywords: school closures, school mergers

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Traditional business models are being used to address school financial concerns, potentially at the expense of the academic, career, and personal/social development of children. This is occurring specifically, at the potential disadvantage of marginalized student populations, with already limited academic resources (Fabricant & Fine, 2012 as cited in Fine, 2012). These students and communities may be losing their voices and power through the application of a business practice that has been found to have a 50% failure rate (Terry & O'Brien, 2001), leading to significant capital loss. Notably, human capital of underrepresented students is at stake.

School closings are on the rise across the nation (Ayala & Galletta, 2012). However, we do not know the long term effects on students, staff, and communities in the areas of the closed school (Ayala & Galletta, 2012, Cox & Cox, 2010). According to Kissoon (2012), when school districts close schools, they are sending a negative message to low-income students of color. Although research supports phasing out a school is actually improving the school districts (Karanxka, Agosto, Black, & Effiom, 2013; Nitta, Holley & Wrobel, 2010; Rogers, Glesner, & Meyers, 2014), research needs to now explore if these closures and mergers are impacting students and communities emotionally, and does it lead to poor student academic, career, and personal development, and loss of self and community identity.

A substantial amount of the research on school closures and mergers focuses on rural and small schools, with a significant gap in research regarding larger urban schools (Cox & Cox, 2010). In addition, there is abundant research on school closure and merger impact on district finances, size, and social outcomes, yet evidence concerning affect on education over an extended period is lacking (Cox & Cox, 2010). This demonstrates a significant gap in understanding the emotional impact and the impact on student achievement, parents and their communities. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to acknowledge the potential emotional and psychological impact of school closures and mergers and to present a potential framework for school counselors when working through the emotional and psychological impact of school closures and mergers with students, parents and communities.

Literature Review

Motivation for School Mergers

The success of school closures and mergers are debated in literature. The intention of school closures and mergers is for educational survival and economic benefit. As a result of financial deterioration, mergers and closures are used as an approach for institutional survival and organizational renewal (Barr, 1985). Additionally, because of declining enrollments, decreased funding, and increased accountability, closure and mergers are seen as the option for improving efficiency, student achievement and economic stability (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005).

The overall goal of a school merger or closure is greater efficiency and improvements in quality of education (Mei, Fang, &Yuanyan, 2013). This approach allows for more effective utilization of resources, financial savings, and maintenance of program quality (Barr, 1985). It is recognized that social institutions tend to deteriorate, therefore needing continuous revitalization (Normore, 2004). This process initiates a rejuvenation of an institution with the intention of school and organizational improvement (Normore, 2004).

Corporate Mergers

Mergers, acquisitions, and closures, are popular tactics often used within the corporate world. These strategies can be used to maximize shareholder wealth and to increase the value of the organization. In any case, mergers and acquisitions force employees of the acquired company to integrate into the buying organization (Seo & Hill, 2005). Although the intent of mergers is to bring about further success, more than 50% of them fail to do so (Terry & O'Brian, 2001). Research supports that corporate mergers fail because they do not consider how these changes affect the employees (Seo & Hill, 2005). Mergers and acquisitions can be a significant source of trauma for employees and managers, causing a decrease in self-esteem and work morale (Bligh, 2006). Employees may suffer from anxiety, depression, fear, and other psychological difficulties due to a merger or acquisition (Astrachan, 2004; Bligh, 2006; Burlew, Pederson, & Bradley, 1994; Seo & Hill, 2005; Terry & O'Brian, 2001; van Leeuwen, van

Knippenberg, & Ellemers, 2003). When these negative effects are not addressed, the merger is at risk of failure (Burlew et al., 1994; van Leeuwen et al., 2003).

Research shows that mergers may force group members of the pre-merger group to abandon their old group identity and obtain a new one (van Leeuwen et al., 2003). The drastic change in group identity results in a drop in psychological attachment to the new organization, which may result in in-group bias and a decrease in work performance. In a study conducted by van Leeuwen et al. (2003), the relationship between pre-merger identifications, post-merger identifications, and ingroup bias, was studied using a minimal group paradigm. They found that merging groups identified strongly with their pre-merger group, especially when there was a negative relationship between a subordinate and superordinate group. It was concluded that these circumstances can cause hostility, stress, and uncertainty among the merged group, which can be detrimental to the success of a merger (van Leeuwen et al., 2003).

Similarly, Terry and O'Brian (2001) examined the effects of a merger that occurred between two scientific organizations. They found that employees from the low-status organization (the organization acquired) had the most negative experience in the merger. Employees from the high-status organization accentuated their dominant position within the new organization, which caused ingroup biases to occur (Terry & O'Brian, 2001). Low-status employees felt increased levels of anxiety and threat, and decrease in their job satisfaction (Terry & O'Brian, 2001).

Separation anxiety can also be experienced among workers who are expecting a merger and possible layoffs (Astrachan, 2004). The impending end or change to their work relationship can cause employees to experience strong emotions and behaviors that affect them before and after a merger. To gain a better understanding of separation anxiety in employees, Astrachan (2004) conducted a merger simulation on a group of participants. Results from the simulation showed that separation anxiety occurred just from the announcement of an impending merger. Even though the groups of participants were only together for 90 minutes, the separation anxiety was real. Participants experienced anxiety, feeling lost, hopelessness, decreased participation, and sadness. Anstrachan (2004) concluded that groups that have been together for a long time might experience even more intense feelings of anxiety and separation.

Company mergers and closures can also negatively affect families and the communities in which they occur. For example, Allen and Gough (2006) examined the effects of a sword fishery closure on Vietnamese-American's and their Hawaiian community. Several Vietnamese-Americans were forced to relocate their once-prosperous business to California or switch to the tuna fishing industry. The once close-knit fishing community experienced a decrease in cohesion and their unity was severely damaged. Beyond the loss of income and employment, the fisherman also experienced a range of psychological and social impacts (Allen & Gough, 2006). The sudden change in their lifestyle led to symptoms of depression, anxiety, family stress, and

significant changes in their mood (Allen & Gough, 2006). The stress of the closure and relocation also increased arguments and conflicts within the fishermen families.

Similarly, Burlew et al. (1994) studied the reaction of managers during the pre-acquisition stage of a merger. They found that mergers can cause a wide range of emotions and psychological stresses on all parties involved. Managers from the study reported that they felt denial, rejection, shock, confusion, anger, fear, sadness, and many other emotions when faced with a corporate merger. Burlew et al. (1994) suggested that there need to be counselors involved in mergers and acquisitions. Counselors can aid employees with their career and psychological adjustments by offering group and individual counseling. They can assist employees in career development, as well as help them deal with the grief and stress of their changing career (Burlew et al., 1994).

School Mergers

Not only do mergers affect companies, they affect schools as well (Bligh, 2006). School closings are on the rise across the nation (Ayala & Galletta, 2012), yet little is known about how consolidations have affected the educators and students who have experienced the event (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Mergers and closures have occurred in states as diverse as Arkansas, Montana, Iowa, New York, Louisiana, West Virginia, Kentucky, including merger and closures becoming state legislature policy agendas for Michigan, Vermont and Maine (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). According to Ayala and Galletta (2012), to address federal and state school accountability reform efforts, school closure is utilized as one of several interventions for schools struggling academically. A significant amount of the literature on school mergers are qualitative studies (Mei, Fang, & Yuanyan, 2013) focusing on mergers and closures of rural schools (Nitta, Holley, Wrobel, 2010; Rogers, Glesner, & Meyers, 2014; Self, 2001), debating the financial, school size and community effects (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Few studies focus on the students, teachers and administrators perspective on closures and mergers (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010) and its effects on student achievement (Mei, Fang, &Yuanyan, 2013). Mei, Fang, and Yuanyan, (2013) found contradictions in the literature regarding the correlations between class size and student achievement, including debates regarding additional complex factors such as school culture, student background, and motivation for learning.

For example, according to Kissoon (2012), when school districts close schools, they are sending the message to low-income students of color, "we're going to give up on you, rather than support you" (p. 148). The Urban Youth Collaborative of the 21 phased-out high schools in New York City reported, of the 33,000 students who were in their final years, only 9592 graduated. In these schools, it was discovered the dropout rates were high; reaching 70% in the year the school closed (Kissoon, 2012). It was noted continued closings of schools creates an ongoing cycle, preventing students from becoming "privileged" while matriculating from a poor education system (Kissoon, 2012).

While Kissoon (2012) was concerned with negative messages to current students, Ayala and Galletta (2012) were concerned with the mourning process of the teachers and parents and its potential impact on the new school. Ayala and Galletta (2012) discovered teachers and parents who were a part of a closing school expressed thoughts and emotions related to the mourning of a "dying" school. Parents, students, and educators in the new schools worried that the students and teachers from the closing schools might "taint the new schools" (p. 151) or be like a "cancer that would destroy" (p.151) the new school complex. The new school complex was unofficially charged with absorbing the reputation of the closing schools' failure. As a result, there was considerable tension and distancing between the new school and the closing schools (Ayala & Galletta, 2012). Ultimately, all artifacts and evidence of the closing school's existence were erased, including a painting over of a mural depicting a scene of positive student–teacher interaction created by a group of students from the closing school (Ayala & Galletta, 2012). During the 10 year merging period, the schools learned to negotiate their embedded identities as small schools within a larger complex, strategically sharing resources and collaborating on initiatives. The school community recognized the idea of a shared building legacy and historical continuity. The students saw an opportunity for creating new memories of success and pride for the new school and their community (Ayala & Galletta, 2012).

Ayala and Galletta (2012) also found because school closings originate from local district and state decisions, in relation to federal school accountability policies, they do not reflect community will or activism. Often, district decisions to close schools are highly contested by parents of children attending schools (Ayala & Galletta, 2012). Although there may be agreement about the need for school improvement, the use of school closure as a solution has generated community debate (Ayala & Galletta, 2012). Additional research should further explore the effects of mergers and closures on all people, including students and communities involved in the process.

Benefits of School Mergers

Research identifies several benefits of school closures and mergers. A significant number of school mergers assist school districts financially (Rogers et al., 2014). Allowing schools to streamline, reallocate, and combine resources. A study of an Arkansas school district discovered after mergers, teacher course loads were reduced requiring less preparation for classes (Nitta et al., 2010). Mergers also increased diverse social opportunities for students (Nitta et al., 2010). Nitta et al. (2010) found students adapted better to the new school and flourished in the environment, eager for opportunities to form relationships with other students from different communities. The literature also indicated students in high schools benefit more from consolidation than elementary and middle school students (Self, 2001). High school students were able to take advantage of increased offerings of academic opportunities and course variety (Self, 2001). Additionally, school closures and mergers have offered students and parents "school choice" through the increase in charter school options (Karanxka et al., 2013). These smaller school environments offer lower dropout rates for disadvantaged

students, improved learning experiences, and increased school satisfaction (Strange, 2002).

Consequences of School Mergers

Research also identified several shortcomings of school closures and mergers. According to Malhoit and Black (2003) large closures and mergers have not shown significant financial savings, actually proving to be more expensive to operate due to the increase in behavioral issues, absenteeism, and dropout rates. Cox and Cox (2010) also reported a substantial increase in expenditures. In addition, as expenditures increased, academic performance decreased (Malhoit & Black, 2003). The mergers produced a less efficient and effective school district, costing taxpayers more with diminished outcomes (Cox & Cox, 2010). A significant diminished outcome impacting the community of taxpayers was the loss of community local control (Rogers et al., 2014).

Furthermore, teachers struggled with the transition during a merger, struggling with colleague relationships as well as student-teacher relationships (Nitta et al., 2010). Teachers from a small school merging with a larger school experienced class size increases, pressure to adjust and adapt to the functioning of the larger school (Nitta et al., 2010) and increased workloads and burdens like transportation issues and matching fund shortages (Mei et al., 2014). Teachers in the rural schools of China reported spending less time teaching and dealing with increased work pressures (Qingyang, 2013).

Other findings include, rural schools in China expressed concern regarding bringing together diverse ethnic groups, noticing the complex relationships were erupting into conflicts (Hongyong & Fenfen, 2013). An urban Tennessee school district saw a decline in the number of schools, student population, and average daily attendance while there was a noticeable decrease in enrollment of Caucasian students and significant increase in African American and Hispanic/Latino students (Cox & Cox, 2010). They also was noted academic performance increased, however not significantly or substantially (Cox & Cox, 2010).

It is evident a significant amount of research regarding school closure and merger focuses on the finances, school and class size, and teacher and student social outcomes (Cox & Cox, 2010) However, it appears there is a gap in the research regarding the emotional experiences of students during a school closure and merger (Cox & Cox, 2010). Alsbury and Shaw (2005) admit a limitation of their qualitative study was the collection of experiences as reported through the lens of the district superintendent, which did not include the feelings and experiences of students and the community.

Although school closures and mergers are occurring across the United States, literature supports the pervasive nature of these closures and mergers in low income communities, particularly low income communities with marginalized populations

(Fabricant & Fine, 2012 as cited in Fine, 2012; Fine, 2012). The impact of these closures have been noticeable in cities such as, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. (Layton, 2013). In preparation for the pending closures in Chicago, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless was expecting of the 31,500 Chicago students to be impacted by school closures, approximately 81% would be African American, 93% from low income communities, and 8% homeless (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2013). The Philadelphia School District was preparing for the expectation of approximately 81% of students impacted by the closure to be African American. The Philadelphia and New York City School Districts were expecting the schools slated for closure to have a higher than average population of poverty and disability (Kilkenny, 2013; Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, 2010).

Opposite of intentions, the passage of *No Child Left Behind,* which encourages high stakes testing has accelerated the school closure and merger process of under-resourced schools, which largely served low-income students of color (Aggrawal, Mayorga, & Nevel, 2012). Schwebel (2012) offers a commentary regarding school closures as a form of violence which kills the human spirit of the students. As a result of this violence, these students are consigned to a status that denies them access to the benefits of society (Schwebel, 2012).

Possible Strategies and Interventions

The experiences of company closures and mergers may serve as a guide for understanding the impact and addressing the issues related to school closures and mergers. Taylor, Austin, and Caputo (1992) suggest each merger is a unique and different experience for each organization; however, each merger shares common phases, including a planning phase, integration phase, and postmerger consolidation phase. Mergers and closures are unfortunate events. Fortunately, corporate mergers and closures can teach us valuable lessons regarding what needs to be addressed and how to manage the merger and closure challenges (Ginter, Duncan, Swayne & Shelfer, 1992).

As closures and mergers occur, consideration needs to be given to merging appropriate and compatible organizational cultures. Ginter, et al. (1992) consider mergers organizational euthanasia, meaning death. Literature supports an assessment of organizational fit should be considered during the pre-merger process (Ginter et al., 1992). Organizational fit refers to the compatibility in the areas of management practices, culture and personnel qualifications. It is critical to recognize the merger of two organizations, or schools, as the merger of two cultures, or the possible closure of one culture for the other. They suggest that organizations can deal with one or two major changes; however coping with significant organization discontinuities simultaneously is very difficult, impacting the process of "blaming versus coping". Planning is a critical business practice, requiring the anticipation of the full effect of the merger and closure (Ginter et al., 1992). Therefore, it is recommended that school

administrators, faculty, and school counselors of the two cultures engage together to explore and learn the nuances of each culture for effective school mergers.

In addition, loss of community control and identity must be considered during the closure and merger process. Jetten and Hutchison (2011) found understanding historical continuity as critical to navigating the challenges of mergers and closures. Jetten and Hutchison (2011) reviewed research that supports that disruption to self-continuity is negatively associated with mental health and well-being. Historical continuity refers to the connectedness of the past identity to the present and future identity (Jetten & Hutchison, 2011). Jetten and Hutchison (2011) suggest historical continuity provides the foundation for identity. For schools, the name, mascot, school colors, and sports teams shape the schools identity or historical continuity. This is significant because mergers are seen as a break from the past and loss of identity. Jetten and Hutchison's study found that if the merger includes the reassurance that the group affected by the closure can keep their name, they were willing to accept the new identity. They found this to align with previous dual identity research (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000) suggesting when subgroups are reassured that their identity will be respected within the superordinate group, the subgroup will be more willing to identify with the superordinate group.

Furthermore, consideration of the emotional and psychological impact must be included during the closure and merger process. Taylor, Austin and Caputo (1992) suggest mergers and closures lead to worry about job loss, opportunities in the new organization, uncertainties regarding assignments, new supervision and authority relationships, changes in organizational structures, procedures and protocols, losses in quality of services, new leadership sensitivity to constituent needs, and friendliness of new colleagues (Taylor et al., 1992). Taylor et al. also suggest the response to mergers and closures include depression, low motivation, low productivity, reduced organizational commitment, antagonistic and disruptive behavior, absenteeism, dysfunctional physical symptoms, and resignations. They found the response to school mergers and closures could include depression, low motivation, low academic performance, lack of school identity, disruptive and bullying behavior, absenteeism, and dropping out. Ginter et al. (1992) also noted transition challenges and recognize constituents are asked to function "the best they can" as "lame ducks" during a tumultuous event. They suggest during "disbanding versus sustaining" it is important to develop incentives to help those involved in the merger and closure "keep their lives together" in the midst of the organizational death and despair. For schools, the incentives could include new school colors and mascots, and "challenge day" activities to excite the students about the new opportunities.

In addition to teachers, administrators and students, inclusion of the parents and community is imperative during the closure and merger process. Cook and Swain's (2001) qualitative study found that parents felt very strongly about being a part of the planning process of the school closure and merger. The parents felt they had the understanding, knowledge and expertise, that could help develop strategies to address

children's needs, in preparation of and for the school merger and closure. The information received during the process appeared to be infrequent, jumbled and conflicting. Therefore, it is imperative that parents receive clear information regarding the provisions and implications of their children's education. Cook and Swain (2001) found the reorganization of the school led to parents worry regarding the size of the school, the staff/pupil ratio, safety, allocation of resources, the identified school no longer functioning as the local school, bullying, and alienation. This confirms Ginter et al.'s (1992) belief regarding the process of "shielding versus informing". They agree that it is better to inform the community to prevent misinformation. In addition, when considering "delegating versus inventing", it is recommended that the community get involved in the disbanding of the organization, which allows for more awareness of what is happening, and allows for better planning of the future (Ginter et al., 1992).

Potential School Counselors Interventions

Little research has explored the emotional and psychological impact of school closures and mergers on children. Based upon research examining corporate and school closures and mergers, the psychological implications include depression, high anxiety, low motivation, low productivity, reduced organizational commitment, antagonistic and disruptive behavior, absenteeism, dysfunctional physical symptoms, substance abuse and resignations (Canaff & Wright, 2004; Taylor et al., 1992). For school closures and mergers, the psychological implications can be translated to include potential depression, high anxiety, low motivation, low academic performance, lack of school identity, disruptive and bullying behavior, absenteeism, substance abuse and dropping out. School counselors can help by being prepared and available to assist students, school faculty and families with emotional and psychological challenges during the merger and closure process. School counselors should be prepared to serve in the roles of mental health professional, collaborator, consultant, and advocate (Canaff & Wright, 2004). However, research is needed to explore strategies for working with the emotional and psychological issues surrounding school closures and mergers (Ayala & Galletta, 2012, Cox & Cox, 2010). Although the literature supports the inclusion of counselors during the process (Burlew et al., 1994; Canaff & Wright, 2004), studies regarding the inclusion of the school counselor's role and perspective in the process of school merger transitions is scarce (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005).

As a mental health professional in the schools, it is recommended that school counselors address grief and loss issues (Canaff & Wright, 2004). The school counselor can assess for the existence of grief and loss symptoms, including anxiety, anger, depression, adjustment issues, and grief. Assessing the emotional challenges of the students can be instrumental in identifying those who are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and depression to refer to the appropriate counseling services. The school counselor can assist the students and faculty to grieve the loss and manage the transition, while assisting in the navigation of the stages of grief (anger, denial, depression, bargaining, and acceptance). In addition, it will be important for the school

counselor to be aware of the imbalance and dysfunction that can occur in the families during the closure and merger (Canaff & Wright, 2004).

As a collaborator and consultant, the school counselor can be instrumental in developing and implementing various strategies and interventions to bring the merging communities together. The school counselor's presence can be beneficial during the planning, integration, and postmerger consolidation phases. Historical continuity provides the foundation for identity (Jetten & Hutchison, 2011). Therefore, during the planning phase the school counselor can facilitate the process of bridging the past identities of the merging schools to form the new identity. The school counselor can collaborate with the constituents involved in the merger (students, faculty, administrators, parents) to address issues, such as the school name, mascot, school colors, and sports teams. During the integration phase, the school counselor can provide the individual and group counseling services, as well as develop effective communication and team building programs to assist with the transition and adjustment to the merger. During the postmerger consolidation phase, the school counselor can continue to implement the counseling services and programs to solidify the identity of the new school.

As an advocate, the school counselor can work with school leadership to represent the needs of the students and parents. Literature finds mergers and closures can lead to worry about opportunities in the new organization, uncertainties regarding assignments, new supervision and authority relationships, changes in organizational structures, procedures and protocols, losses in or quality of services, new leadership sensitivity to constituent needs, and friendliness of new colleagues (Taylor, Austin, & Caputo, 1992). The school counselor can be instrumental in bringing awareness of the needs of students and parents to the school leadership, and ensuring their issues and concerns are considered when making changes to the organizational structures and protocol.

Conclusion

There is little research discussing the implications of and strategic interventions for school closures and mergers. However, school closures and mergers are inevitable. This is particularly true for communities with low performing schools, low enrollment, blight and poverty. Strategies need to be researched and developed to effectively merge school communities and address the emotional challenges of the students, parents, school personnel, and communities involved. If research supports closures and mergers creates significant trauma and turmoil in the lives of adult employees of companies, then consideration needs to be given to address the potential trauma, challenges and distress of kindergarten through twelfth grade students, faculty, parents and communities involved in closures and mergers.

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